

Art Against the Nation: The Relationship between the Anarchist Movement and Italian Nationalism in the Artwork *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* by Enrico Baj (1972)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relation between anarchism, art and the state in the twentieth-century Italian context. In particular, I investigate the painting-installation *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* by Enrico Baj (1972) to explore the relationship between the display of the artwork and active involvement in the anarchist movement. First, I introduce the theoretical and historical background of the examination, linked to the scholarly debate on the influences between anarchism, Futurism, and fascism. Secondly, I describe the genesis, the socio-political implications and the trajectory of Baj's artwork. Ultimately, I draw some conclusions about the relationship between art and nationalism, and the question of memory in national canons. The main argument of this paper is that the path to the institutional recognition of *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* was long and difficult not because of the inner clashes between anarchist ideology and institutional settings, but rather because of the rejection of anarchist art in the contemporary Italian national canon.

Keywords: *Anarchist art, Italian anarchism, Futurism, nationalism, Italian art, Enrico Baj, Carlo Carrà, Pinelli, Piazza Fontana bombing*

INTRODUCTION

On 20 December 1969, between 1000-3000 people marched in funerary procession from the workers' district of San Siro in Milan to the cemetery of Musocco. A single priest was present at the non-religious ceremony. The only other officials were the police who blocked access to the cemetery, preventing entry to most of the participants. The coffin of Giuseppe Pinelli, a Milanese anarchist activist, was covered with the black and red flag for his last salute. Some raised their fists in the air and chanted internationalist songs. Commentators detected a rancorous undertone in the atmosphere (Foot 2002, pp641-2), in marked contrast to the earlier funerals of Palmiro Togliatti in 1964 and Enrico Berlinguer twenty years later. Togliatti and Berlinguer had both served as secretary to the Italian Communist Party. Togliatti's funeral, portrayed by the painter Renato Guttuso, was a-wash with red flags. Berlinguer's also attracted incredible public participation, not surprisingly since 1984 was the year that the Communist Party overtook the Christian Democrats in the European elections for the first and last time.

This paper explores the relation between anarchism, art and the state in the twentieth-century Italian context. In particular, I investigate the painting-installation *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* by Enrico Baj (1972) to explore the relationship between the display of the artwork and active involvement in the anarchist movement. I situate this investigation in the wider discussion on the triangulation between anarchism, Futurism, and fascism. The influences of anarcho-syndicalism on Futurism (generally aligned to Mussolini's fascist movement) and vice versa are part of a recent scholarly debate. Daniele Conversi (2016) denies that anarchism had a significant impact on the political development of Futurism by claiming that anarchism, but not Futurism, represented a real threat to the political elites in the early years of the twentieth century. Building on his hypothesis, I will explain the struggle for Baj's oeuvre to enjoy a permanent institutional setting.

The main argument of this paper is that the path to the institutional recognition of *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* was long and difficult not because of the inner clashes between anarchist ideology and institutional settings, but rather because of the determination to exclude anarchist art from the contemporary Italian national canon. First, I introduce the theoretical and historical background of the examination. Secondly, I describe the genesis, the socio-political implications and the trajectory of Baj's artwork. Ultimately, I will draw some conclusions about the relationship between art and nationalism, and the question of memory in national canons.

ANARCHISM AND MODERNIST NATIONALISM

In creating *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* Enrico Baj's intention was to reinterpret *I funerali dell'anarchico Galli* by the Futurist painter Carlo Carrà. This depicts the fatal stabbing of the syndicalist Angelo Galli during a general strike in Milan in 1904. Baj's reference to Carrà makes debates about the instantiation of anarchism in the Futurist movement, which openly aligned with the fascist regime from the end of the 1920s, impossible to ignore.

While several authors have pointed out the initial similarities and connections between Futurism and anarchism, more recent analysts tend to separate the two movements. According to Daniele Conversi, Futurism represented the culmination of a 'modernist nationalism' (2016, p792). He argues that the traditional Italian canon, represented by the *Risorgimento*, was incorporated by elites to shape national historiography, arts and political narrative of the State. At the beginning of the nineteenth century and during the period of rapid industrial development, nationalist ideologies in Italy and France were radicalised in reaction to it. Interestingly, in the current canon, Italian national art still encompasses this period by stressing the same features of progress and 'avant-garde' development.

In contrast Conversi contextualises the rise of Futurism by looking at the late nineteenth century when political assassinations plotted by anarchists posed a serious threat in most Western states, especially after the killing of the French President, Marie François Sadi Carnot in 1894, Spanish Prime Minister, Antonio Canovas del Castillo, in 1897 and 'Sissi' Empress Elisabeth of Austria, in 1898 (2016, p793). For the Italian context, the escalation culminated in the assassination of King Umberto I of Savoy in 1900 by the anarchist Gaetano Bresci. In this climate, the cultivation of national ideology and patriotic virtue was paired with national and international mechanisms of surveillance. Four years after Prime Minister Francesco Crispi introduced the 'centralised political register' in 1894 to keep an eye on individuals and groups dangerous to public safety, the International Anti-Anarchist Conference held in Rome in 1898 laid the foundation stones for the creation of Interpol. The combined effect of this police effort has been recently described as 'the first global war on terror' (Merriman 2009 in Conversi 2016, p794). As Noam Chomsky notes, a similar reaction took place in the United States; President Wilson's Red Scare policy against 'subversives' in 1919 'was harsh on socialists, but [...] murdered anarchists' (Chomsky 2014, p29). The same type of repression appeared again after May 1968 and particularly in Italy where the anarchist groups were threatened and singled out after the Piazza Fontana bombing.

TWO AND MORE FUNERALS

December 12, 1969 is a pivotal date in modern Italian history. A bomb exploded in the National Bank of Agriculture of Piazza Fontana, a few steps away from Piazza Duomo, in the very centre of Milan. More than one hundred people were injured, seventeen fatally (Viale 1978). The terrorist attack was later attributed to the neo-fascist movement, but the perpetrators were never brought to justice. The event marks the end of the 1968 movement (Boatti 2009), paving the way for the start of the so-called 'Years of Lead' (*Anni di Piombo*). The decade of the 1970s were indeed characterised by the 'Strategy of Tension': an escalation of violence and armed political attacks from the extremist leftist and subversive neo-fascist fringes, with implications that were unclear for the Italian state, until the neo-fascist Bologna massacre of August 1980. On the night of 15 December, the anarchist railway worker, Giuseppe Pinelli, under interrogation about the events of Piazza Fontana, 'fell out of the window' of the police station where he was being detained, and died. The police initially described Pinelli's death as the result of a sudden illness.

Enrico Baj's ideation of the oeuvre *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* is directly linked with these events. The artwork depicts the tragic situation, leading the eyes of the viewer through the huge composition of removable figures (which were later donated to Milanese activists and also used for 'pataphysician' theatre performances¹). Visitors are invited to move around the space and get closer to the sloping panel covered with cotton, while some distance is maintained to enable the staged representation of the scene.

John Foot (2002) provides a detailed account of the genesis of the artwork. Baj was contacted by the municipality of Milan in 1971 to prepare an exhibition in the suggestive 'Sala delle Cariatidi' of palazzo Reale, which had been damaged badly by British bombings in the Second World War. Baj had seen Picasso's *Guernica* in 1953 in the same room, which had never been fully restored, thus serving as a testament to the destruction. Therefore, the painter agreed to hold the exhibition on condition that only one piece was to be shown in the space. As part of his preparatory research, Baj visited Pinelli's family and undertook part of the work in the anarchist club 'Ponte della Ghisolfa': Pinelli had frequented the space as an activist.²

The actual painting-installation (Figure 1) resulted in an impressive collection of thirteen figures. In total the work was twelve meters in length and four meters in height (Foot 2002, p645). A neat contrast can be observed between the human figures on the left, including a journalist and anarchists holding flags

and raising their fists (one of them is Baj himself) next to Pinelli's family, and the monstrous figures of the policemen on the right-hand side. The rather inhuman figures of the policemen are reminiscent of a previous work, *The Generals*, which Baj exhibited at the 1963 Sao Paolo Biennale in Brazil. He was censored during the exhibition and later condemned by the Chief of Staff of the Italian Army, General Liuzzi (Corgnati 1997, p15). As Martina Corgnati argues, Baj depicts neither the funeral nor a salient reconstruction of the death of Pinelli, but rather a series of iconic figures reacting to the drama, directly drawing on Picasso's work. This thus represents a step further in the reinterpretation of *I funerali dell'anarchico Galli* by the Futurist painter Carlo Carrà, the oeuvre that Baj had planned to revisit for several years. If Carrà's version enhances the action and its velocity according to the precepts of Futurism (through a dynamic contrast of centripetal and chaotic movements), Baj takes one step forward, directly addressing and challenging the actors involved in the scene.



Figure 1, Enrico Baj, *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* (1971-72),
Courtesy of Roberta Cerini Baj (Archivio Baj)

Baj's reinterpretation of Carrà dramatically accentuates the political indictment of Pinelli's killing. The clarity of the symbols and figures, the striking division between the characters on the left and the right and the horror on Pinelli's face,

helplessly tumbling through the air in the centre of the scene, evoke the rawness of grief and anger provoked by the oppressive institutions, responsible for his death. Moreover, at the opening exhibition, the window encompassing the *Guernican* lantern and the anonymous hands was supposed to be placed not over the figure of Pinelli, but over the exit door through which the visitors would have walked out of the room, as a haunting reminder that the issue was not solved. Finally, the three-dimensional feature of Baj's *Funeral* allows the spectator to walk towards the figures, thus demanding an intense personal interaction.

What is even more striking is the account of the exhibition. Indeed, the controversy over Baj's opening symbolises the dawn of the revolutionary 1968 movement for a climate of terror and restoration. The very same day of the opening, 17 May, 1972, the Commissar, Luigi Calabresi, against whom a media campaign was mounted to identify him as one of the key people culpable for Pinelli's assassination, was shot dead by two members of the far-left extra-parliamentary organisation *Lotta Continua* (Continuous Struggle). Notwithstanding the 2000 printed copies of the catalogue, the posters of the exhibition displayed all around the city and the invitations sponsored by the mayor, the opening was cancelled. A handwritten sign was placed on the door of the Museum explaining that the suspension was due to 'technical reasons' (Foot 2002, p646). Following this event, Baj, and *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* in particular, was boycotted and ostracised by the mainstream media, galleries and authorities. In 2000, the Marconi Gallery exhibited the artwork and offered it as a donation to the municipality of Milan, while a permanent institutional setting could be found. After a campaign run by *Radio Popolare* in January 2018, an agreement with the municipality of Milan was finally reached in 2019 to exhibit the oeuvre in Palazzo Citterio of the prestigious Pinacoteca di Brera, the main public gallery in the city (*Radio Popolare* 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have offered an account of the complex relationship between anarchist art and the Italian nation, to show how the monopoly of state violence lies in the institutional censorship of *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli*. Baj's depiction of Pinelli's death enhances the tragic elements of that violence, thus representing the aestheticisation of the syndicalist action portrayed by Carrà as an open denunciation of Pinelli's assassination. Finally, while the legacy of the Futurist movement has been incorporated in the national canon through the identification with a 'modernist nationalism' perspective, the collocation of an anarchist oeuvre directly challenging state actors is still highly contentious.

The twentieth-century is defined by a struggle between the state authorities and anarchist resistance. The controversy over the artwork of Enrico Baj symbolises this struggle by its protracted exclusion from the Italian canon and the attempt to erase it from the artistic memory of the city of Milan.

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NOTES

1. A footage of the *pièce* 'Re Ubu a Chernobyl' is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PF_lzOwztVU [last accessed on 16 May 2020].
2. One picture of Baj working on the *Funeral* at the Circolo Anarchico Ponte della Ghisolfi in Milan is available at <http://www.arivista.org/?nr=375&pag=89.htm> (the first one in the article).

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